

GOLD COAST

Professor Paul Van Buynder says pushing anti-vax views should be criminal offence

A leading medic is so angry about the impact of anti-vax views in the Gold Coast community on children's health he believes radical measures may have to be taken.

[Ann Wason Moore](#), Gold Coast Bulletin

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HIPPY parents, paranoid hill people, irresponsible doctors ... the anti-vax army is growing ever stronger, even as both evidence and the body count mount.

The Gold Coast has just recorded triple its average number of measles cases this year, undoing 15 years of work in increasing immunisations, and our urban centre of Surfers Paradise now has one of the lowest rates of vaccination in the state.

And now we're losing one of the city's greatest defenders, public health physician and infectious diseases epidemiologist Professor Paul Van Buynder.

But while the former chairman of the Australian Immunisation Coalition and Griffith University School of Medicine professor might be retiring from his post to move to Melbourne, he'll never stop fighting to spread science for the sake of our own safety.

In the five years he has been running public immunisation clinics on the Gold Coast, he has chalked up some major victories, even in the midst of this anti-vax battleground.

Despite these triumphs, Prof Van Buynder says he only wishes he had the power to make the anti-vax stance a criminal offence, such is the threat it poses to the population. He says the growing movement has played a critical role in the local and global boom in preventable disease in the past year.

"Look at the Gold Coast Hinterland ... it accounts for about one to two per cent of the city's population and in some years 50 per cent of all whooping cough cases

are from there,” he says.

“It also has one of the lowest rates of vaccination coverage in Queensland. It’s full of anti-vaxxers and vaccine sceptics.

“Australia was measles-free years ago. Now all of a sudden, thanks to anti-vaxxers, measles is back. It’s an absolute tragedy.

“It’s not just here either. We’re now advocating that children have a measles jab at six months if they’re travelling to Europe, Asia, the United States or New Zealand.

“It’s not just ‘exotic’ countries that are risky. There’s so much anti-vax sentiment in Italy, Greece, France ... the Netherlands is particularly bad because of the Dutch Reform Party’s anti-vax push.

“In Samoa, more than 70 people are dead from measles, and that county’s low vaccination rate was blown up by anti-vaxxers.

“It started as a nursing error there, then the government suspended the vaccination program and then the conspiracists moved in. Measles is a horrible disease. If you don’t die you can be left brain damaged, deaf, disabled, the list goes on.

“Just on the Gold Coast we’ve had three times the number of measles cases. That means we’ve effectively given up 15 years of immunisation program success.

“This pushing of unscientific views should be criminal. I have a real problem with parents who don’t want to protect their children. Even worse, they then make it their cause to scare other parents. As we’ve found out in the medical community, it’s much harder to reassure people than to scare them.”



📷 Professor Paul Van Buynder.



📷 Low vaccination rates means the Gold Coast hinterland accounts for half of the city’s whooping cough cases.

Prof Van Buynder says that unfortunately, there can be rogue individuals in the medical community itself.

He says he warned a Gold Coast obstetrician he would be reported to the Medical Board for breach of practice after the doctor told pregnant women not to get vaccinated, while a GP at Nerang quit after telling patients that immunisations could cause autism.

“These are people who are directly going against science, evidence and medical directions. The damage they do is beyond disappointing,” says Prof Van Buynder.

“We took the GP in Nerang to the health complaints commission. She was giving everyone who wanted it an exemption for vaccinations so they could still claim their Centrelink payments. Then we found out she was telling patients immunisation could cause autism. Once we started the investigation she chose to retire so she never faced the consequences.

“As for the obstetrician, we know that if pregnant women get a flu shot it will protect the babies, who are one of the most at-risk demographics when it comes to flu fatalities.

“In our research, we interviewed over 1000 post-partum women on the Gold Coast and while 85 per cent had a whopping cough shot, only 35 per cent had a flu shot.

“Part of the challenge is convincing our colleagues that this is critical for women, that they can be hospitalised if they get the flu and lose the baby.

“One obstetrician on the Gold Coast was directly telling patients not to be vaccinated against the flu. I told him I would report him to the medical board for breach of practice. You can’t contradict the national guidelines, but I saw a woman just last week who said he had still told her the same thing.

“It’s disheartening but we just have to keep fighting against misinformation.”



 Medical staff attend to patients during a measles breakout in Samoa last month which killed 62 people, including children. Picture: Government of Samoa.

Prof Van Buynder says greater education is needed to increase uptake of the flu vaccine among the general population. But he says although 2019 was the worst flu season on record, it was also one of the best.

“What happened this year was exciting. Numbers-wise it was the worst flu season since we started counting properly but despite that, and due to a change in the vaccination program, the actual hospitalisation rates were far lower.

“Two years ago we had a bad flu season and compared to the number who were hospitalised then, we only had 40 per cent of that number this year. It was a bad flu season number-wise but the illness itself was so much less severe.

“One reason for this was because we started using an enhanced flu vaccine for older people, who are so much more at risk. It was a far more effective vaccine but still safe. People still got sick but not severely so. The real issue with flu amongst the elderly is the chronic disability it leads to afterwards. Once they’re hospitalised they just rarely fully recover.

“The other thing that made a difference was that we trebled the number of kids under the age of five who were vaccinated – they are the super spreaders ... and also end up in hospital.

“We still have work to do. The flu vaccine is regarded more suspiciously than almost any other. People just don’t trust it. The truth is that it can’t give you the flu, it doesn’t have nasty side effects, and it does work.”

Prof Van Buynder says the HPV vaccine is the other immunisation that provokes fear among parents. He says a push by far-right Christian groups has seen anti-vaxxing go viral at Gold Coast schools.

“When it comes to the HPV vaccine, there is just so much rubbish behind it. A lot of it comes from the American College of Paediatricians. That group sounds really official but they’re not.

“The real group is the American Academy of Paediatrics, which has more than 30,000 members. About 20 years ago, 100 of them resigned because the academy refused to say that children raised by homosexual parents do worse than those raised by heterosexual parents.

“Ever since they’ve just peddled a range of nonsense that fits their religious rhetoric. They are saying the HPV vaccine will stop girls’ ovaries from functioning and a whole lot of other nonsense.

“The problem is these things get discussed and spread like a virus on social media. We see it every year here on the Gold Coast. We’ll be working at a school and all of a sudden a batch of parents will withdraw their children from the program.

“You just know that someone has shared something on Facebook or been chatting at pick-up time. Every year it’s a different school.

“It’s almost an elitist thing. Some of the most highly educated mums think their kids can just coast on the herd immunity. It’s a sense of entitlement that they don’t need to follow the public safety guidelines – but everyone else does.”



📷 Professor Van Buynder stresses that science is behind childhood vaccination.

Although anti-vax rhetoric angers him, he says he takes care to listen to parents' fears and to explain the science. He says a sensitive approach is critical if anyone is serious about increasing immunisation rates.

“If parents say they want separated vaccines, we work out a program. Of course, my preference is not to do that because that means the poor kid gets traumatised every week, but if that's what it takes that's what we'll do.

“If someone says they want to think about it, I make sure they leave with some written information and that we make a specific appointment to discuss it again. I'll take the time to reassure them that no harm will come of this, that science is behind it.

“It's important to really have the conversations, to take the time to explore the specifics of what's worrying them.

“However, if a parent comes in and says ‘I've done my research and immunisations are dangerous’, I don't even bother. If they have reached the point where they've come in to tell the infectious disease epidemiologist he doesn't know what he's talking about, I'm never going to change their mind. They've only come in to tell me I'm wrong.

“A lot of parents are worried about a specific antigen and I'm happy to reassure them. They're not bad parents, they just need more information. What I take issue with is parents who argue they have a right to choose, when to me the child's right to be protected should override that.”

Prof Van Buynder says he will leave his post proud of the work he has done, but he also knows he leaves behind a team of passionate nurses, administration staff and health care providers to continue the public health program.

In the five years he has run immunisation clinics on the Gold Coast, he has chalked up some major victories, even in the midst of an anti-vax battleground.

In 2014, the city was second worst in Australia for coverage in its school immunisation program, and the worst in Queensland for vaccination coverage for babies. School coverage rates have now been boosted by 20 per cent and baby schedules are on par with the rest of the state.

Babies are the best part of his job, he says.